

My name is Katharina Werner. I am the Domestic and Sexual Violence Program Director at the YWCA Missoula and the Chair of the Missoula Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force. I am here today to speak in support of HB 89, a bill that would significantly strengthen our already existing anti-human trafficking laws.

For the past 2 years I have been heavily involved with the issue of human trafficking, both in our state and in the Missoula community. I helped create a local task force addressing sexual exploitation and in my role as a social worker and advocate for victims of violence I have directly worked with both foreign nationals and American citizens, adults and minors, that were victims of sex trafficking. I also provide outreach and education to law enforcement, social services, and medical professionals and community members all over Montana to train them about the indicators of this crime.

Today I want to share an all too familiar story with you about a young girl who was forced to have sex with over 500 customers during the 6 months she was under the control of her trafficker. This girl had experienced violence and homelessness growing up, her family was living in extreme poverty, and she skipped school and was involved in high risk behaviors such as smoking, drinking and unprotected sex. When she was befriended by an older male who promised to take care of her and who gave her food, shelter, and "love" she ran away from home and followed him to another city. Within 24 hours provocative pictures of her were posted on adult websites like backpage.com and her "boyfriend / pimp" used physical and sexual violence, psychological coercion, and the threat of violence to force her into sexual acts in exchange for money. Money he was getting and money that is part of the 32 billion dollar industry of sex trafficking in the United States each year.

I started working with this girl after she had returned to Montana. She was a few months shy of her 18th birthday and when I tried finding support services and shelter for her I realized that Montana was not equipped to deal with her situation and the trauma she had experienced. Not only are there no service providers trained to provide support to these children and women but professionals and community members alike don't know or don't believe that this is even a problem in our towns.

Trafficking is modern day slavery and the greatest human rights and social justice issue of our time. It is easy to say "this problem does not exist in our state...this is something that happens in Thailand or in big American cities like LA or Seattle". Trafficking is a crime that is easily and often missed or mislabeled as something else. Our eyes only see what they are trained to see and therefore we miss the warning signs and red flags. But they are out there...

Trafficking is about vulnerabilities and traffickers target the most oppressed and marginalized people in our society; just like the young girl I told you about. The vast majority of girls and

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women working in the sex trade have a history of prior trauma and prior involvement with the child welfare and foster care system. Traffickers also capitalize on the risk factors present on remote reservations and in tribal communities: extreme poverty, homelessness, the lack of access to education, chronic unemployment, discrimination and the lack of opportunities.

It is safe to say that these vulnerabilities exist in our communities here in Montana. Consequently, it is our responsibility to figure out what needs to be done to help victims of this crime and hold offenders accountable. HB 89 would do exactly that: It would strengthen consistency with other states that have successfully prosecuted HT cases and it would add elements to the uniform law in place that would increase victim's safety and offender accountability. Lastly, research shows that the key to identifying and thus helping victims and prosecuting traffickers is education about this issue. The creation of a Human Trafficking Education Fund as laid out in this bill would ensure funding to educate the public and professionals and bring awareness to this issue.

The young girl I told you about needs and deserves our help. We have a responsibility to speak up for the most vulnerable people in our society and this is our chance to do so. Please send a strong statement against violence and exploitation in our beautiful state and pass this bill.

- IMPACT LETTER OF TASK FORCE!